

BCLUW/GMG Districts



"We get to continue this initiative until it's in place! In the past we've ridden a lot of horses partway into the river and then changed horses, fallen off and gotten wet!"

Initial Implementation of the Iowa Professional Development Model

A. About the Districts

[Note: The BCLUW and GMG districts were not part of the DE seminars designed to orient AEAs (Area Education Agencies) to the Iowa professional Development Model. AEA 267 nominated the districts for case studies because they worked closely with IASB (Iowa Association of School Boards) to implement the model in these sites.]

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BCLUW and GMG are two separate school districts with two separate boards who share a superintendent. BCLUW has one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school and serves 675 students, while GMG has one K-6 building and one high school and serves 459 students. These adjoining districts serve a rural population that is predominantly white and middle class. Thirty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch and ten percent of the students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Under the leadership of Superintendent Mike Ashton and with technical assistance from Harry Heiligenthal of the Iowa Association of School Boards/Lighthouse Project, the two districts combined their resources to cooperate in a single professional development initiative for the 2003-2004 academic year. All five schools in the two districts participated in the PD program described below.

Department of Education Site Visit

Department of Education staff visited BCLUW/GMG on March 9, 2004. Three of the five schools in the two districts were visited, and all principals were interviewed either individually or as part of their leadership team. All leadership teams were interviewed. Harry Heiligenthal of IASB joined DE staff for the morning interviews and observations and Lorna Kennedy of AEA 267 participated in interviews and observations throughout the day.

"The training was excellent. Florence [trainer] had 20+ years experience, was positive, and provided a user-friendly manual. She provided a lot of examples, demonstrated, had us work in jigsaw activities . . ."

B. Applying the Operating Principles

Focus on Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

BCLUW and GMG have done an excellent job with all the operating principles. Thorough analysis of their ITBS/ITED data resulted in a focus on reading K-12 and all their PD efforts have centered on student reading needs. While this focus has been translated somewhat differently at the elementary and secondary levels, everyone from the superintendent and board through leadership team members and all teachers interviewed were extremely clear on their focus.

“On Focusing: In the past we have been frustrated when we got inservice on one topic, then another. We feel the administration has supported a single focus versus bouncing around hoping something would stick. Now we’re working closer to the classroom.”



Participative Decision-making

Each of the five schools selected a site-based leadership team composed of the principal and a representative group of teachers. These teachers then came together to form district leadership teams for the two districts and finally, representatives from both district teams formed a leadership team for the two districts. The purpose of the two-district leadership team was to study research on reading, select possible options that aligned with their identified student needs, identify expert trainers and costs, and communicate with the combined boards and

superintendent regarding their decisions. Because these groups functioned so well, teachers in all the schools and leadership teams felt PD decisions were their own. In addition, because communication was consistent between leadership teams and the superintendent and boards, all felt extraordinarily well supported by their boards as well as by their external support systems (AEA and IASB). It is unusual to have so many interviewees volunteer that their superintendent and board are not only fully supportive of their PD efforts but interested as well.

Leadership

The leadership of this PD initiative has been strong at all levels. The superintendent and boards had very able technical assistance from IASB on the Iowa Professional Development Model. Principals and teachers alike expressed gratitude for the hands-on guidance of IASB. As one principal noted, “You need someone like Harry. I didn’t know how to do this, have never done it before.” Because the PD model structured professional development so differently from past practice, all appeared grateful for the external support.

The forming of leadership teams at school, district, and combined district levels worked well to keep all informed about PD options and decisions. The leadership teams, in conjunction with the superintendent and boards, kept everyone apprised of their work and consequently, everyone felt PD decisions were made democratically.

“I only knew how to call and set up an inservice, I never knew how to support an implementation or use data to guide inservice.”

The superintendent and principals attended training with their staffs, many demonstrated the strategies learned in teacher's classrooms, and all visited classrooms regularly to observe progress with implementation of the new strategies.

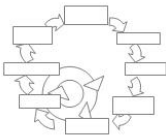
Principals of all 5 schools meet with collaborative teams and have focused their initial involvement on interacting with teams they anticipated may need more support during their first semester of collaborative planning. In summary, this is one of the best examples of distributed leadership we have observed to date.

Simultaneity

BCLUW/GMG has been so focused on their PD initiative this year that distractions don't appear to have been an issue. They have smoothly set up a governance system for PD without losing sight of their main agenda – the learning and implementation of thinking strategies to address student needs in reading comprehension. Their next challenge will be to maintain their focus on the strategies, continually sophisticating their use and aligning that use with student comprehension needs, while addressing the challenges presented by a need to collect formative data on student progress. At the middle school, this work has also led to the desire for a different formal reading program, and that will compete for teachers' attention as well.

Teachers have really appreciated the focus on a single PD initiative. There were many comments about past practice—the introduction to many topics and the lack of implementation of any. Teachers have felt both relieved by this focus, which makes the task seem possible, and hopeful, because they believe students are benefiting from their PD efforts.

C. The Professional Development Cycle



As is true of all the schools and districts who piloted the Iowa Professional Development Model during the 2003-04 academic year, BCLUW/GMG addressed some components of the PD cycle more thoroughly than others. These two districts excelled in designing and implementing a participative decision making system, in working with this board and community, and in the process used to select content.

Collecting and Analyzing Student Data

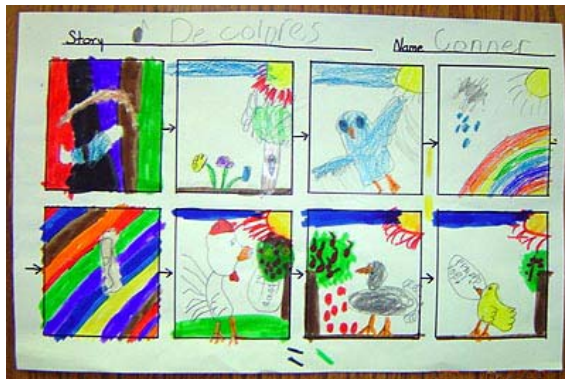
The superintendent, principals and board initially analyzed student data to determine student needs. This process was fairly familiar to the principals and superintendent, and although not all had done item analyses of test data, they found the process fairly straightforward. When they brought the leadership teams into the process, however, it was quite a different story. Many teachers reported they had never done data analysis before and certainly not to the extent done this year. There was great clarity and agreement among teachers about student needs as a result of the more inclusive approach to data analysis.



Goal Setting

Student data revealed a need for greater skill in higher-order comprehension of all kinds of text. At the secondary level, this was seen as a thinking-skills deficit. Students were struggling with all kinds of text, not just “English” assignments.

The district goal was to improve the reading comprehension of students, K through 12.



Selecting Content

For two reasons, the leadership of BCLUW/GMG wanted to address student need with professional development that included all schools in the two districts. First, of course, was the matter of resources; it is expensive to bring in different trainers for different schools when PD is designed to be on-going. Second, the leadership wanted this first trial of the Iowa Professional Development Model to serve

as common training for all in the use of the PD model while changing earlier patterns of behavior with respect to PD.

The leadership teams were charged with examining research on instructional strategies and identifying those that addressed both comprehension and thinking skills. They were led by members of their AEA and IASB, who designed a process to make the task manageable.

“Peer coaching makes us accountable; the single focus makes it doable. You usually have people who resist but you’d be hard put to find resistance in this [initiative].”

IASB used the DE Content Network web site to identify studies of reading comprehension. They summarized the studies on an organizer that highlighted the critical elements of each study (the organizer was subsequently posted on the DE website). After viewing this initial summary, the leadership teams narrowed their choices to about 10-15 of the studies. IASB and AEA 267 reading consultants obtained the content network reviews and original studies and the leadership team read and analyzed them. This second pass resulted in the selection of five studies which the leadership team felt were viable options for staff development, given their goals. The external consultants then contacted the primary researchers in these five areas and asked for recommendations for trainers, costs and availability. They narrowed options and prioritized viable choices, and after carefully studying each strategy more in depth, they selected a form of graphic organizers called “Thinking Maps” as the content for their staff development.

Both the process and decisions were shared with joint sessions of the boards of the two districts.

Designing Process for Professional Development

An expert in thinking maps was contacted to provide three days of training (distributed through the year) for all K-12 teachers in the two



districts. In addition, a combination of early release and compensatory time was instituted to allow for collaborative team work. As individuals became competent with various thinking maps, they agreed to make video demonstrations to share with others in the district.

One of the PD days with the external expert had to be cancelled because of budget cuts. Even though many were chagrined at the loss of a training day, they were not discouraged.

On-Going Cycle

The leadership team planned on-going learning opportunities throughout the year to support practice of the strategies and collaborative planning on early release and inservice days when the thinking maps trainer was not present. Principals, AEA and IASB consultants and teachers filled the training gap by providing live and taped demonstrations of classroom applications of thinking maps.

Collaboration and Implementation

Collaborative teams were formed differently at the various schools. In some cases, grade levels or departments formed natural teams. In other cases, interdisciplinary teams were formed by the principal. In all five schools, the principal has been a member of or facilitated a team.

"We weren't bringing inservice back to the classroom. Now we discuss training in our teams and figure out ways to implement. It keeps us accountable, needing to bring our logs to peer coaching meetings and knowing somebody is looking at them."

Initially, teachers used collaborative team time to share their uses of the new strategies and attend to the logistics of data collection. At the time we visited the project, teachers were beginning to schedule observations (and coverage) to watch other teachers work. The work of these teams will need to evolve so that collaborative planning and development of lessons occurs during this time.

Despite the fact that team time was not being used to fully exploit the collective wisdom of team members, most teachers interviewed felt the opportunity to work with peers to learn and implement new teaching strategies was one of the most powerful aspects of the IPDM.

"Handling all that data seemed overwhelming, but last month it took our leadership team 30 minutes to crunch the data."

Implementation data were collected by all. Individual teachers maintained logs of their use of the strategies and shared them in collaborative team meetings. The logs had a space for questions, which were addressed by peers, principals, external consultants, or, in some cases, via email by the expert who provided initial training in the strategies. (See examples in Part 4.)



IASB and AEA 267 consultants visited collaborative team meetings and kept their own logs of tasks observed in these meetings. This documentation was very persuasive when asking the board and community to support additional PD time for staff to work on the implementation of new learning strategies. (See example of form in appendix.)

Principals also conducted walk-throughs to get a sense of implementation within their schools (see two example of forms used by principals in appendix.) The forms used to monitor implementation were helpful to the principal by structuring what they observed and by insuring that they observed all teachers equally.

"It's great for those of us in music, art, P.E. to be part of staff development. This is getting us connected with the faculty who teach in the academic content areas. I'm being treated as a part of the school!"



Implementation data were first compiled by the IASB and AEA consultants, then by the principals, and subsequent rounds (or cycles) of data by the leadership teams. These data were presented to the various faculties and enabled them to see objectively what they were getting in place and what needed additional work. Leadership teams used these data to develop agendas for continued professional development and collaborative team meetings.

Formative Data Collection

Implementation Data: The individual logs completed by teachers were analyzed by school, district and the entire project to determine frequency of use of thinking maps and to plan future training. The project did an excellent job of collecting frequency data but is only now struggling with how to determine appropriateness and quality of use (fidelity data).

Student Learning Data: The leadership team is currently examining options for formative data collection with respect to student learning. Because this is a K-12 project, different instruments will be required at the primary and secondary levels. The districts and schools are aware of the need to monitor student progress in comprehending various kinds of text and hope to make some decisions in this area during a summer leadership work session.

"We're analyzing data like we never had. It's really powerful – skimming the data isn't enough."

Summative Data

ITBS and NWEA data will be used to evaluate program effectiveness. ITBS is administered in the fall and winter (varies by grade level) in both BULUW and GMG districts and the first program evaluation will occur mid-year in the 2004-2005 academic year.

External Technical Assistance

Our interviews were full of spontaneous references to the invaluable help provided by IASB and AEA staff. Repeatedly, principals and teachers remarked on their admiration for and gratitude to their external consultants. Many felt this year's PD work would have been impossible without the external technical assistance, or at least painful rather than rewarding.

On external help: "IASB provided a process but never pushed us. They helped us think through all the options to make informed decisions, providing research articles and data. We never would have found all that research!"

D. Observations About the Site Visit

BCLUW and GMG have accomplished impressive strides in their efforts to implement the Iowa Professional Development Model. They have developed functioning leadership teams, processes for analyzing data, setting goals, examining research and selecting appropriate content, organizing collaborative teams and monitoring their implementation of new teaching strategies. The superintendent and the boards of both districts have been fully

engaged in the process, and as a result, teachers feel they have unprecedented support from their boards and community for professional development efforts. Teachers also feel they have a powerful voice in the design of their own professional development and therefore believe this PD is practical at the classroom level and of benefit to students.

"We have a process to get student achievement. K12 have bought into it and will continue it in the future. In the future we could split and go in different directions with content but it's helpful to do the same content this year. Having the troops together for the first time has been helpful. We are all together, gathering information, having fun."



In their second year, BCLUW/GMG will need to address their structures for collaborative work so that teachers can advance to more complex applications of their new strategies. They are already working on the issue of formative data collection so that they can know the impact of their work on student learning and make appropriate adjustments to their implementation. A formal implementation plan that sets targets for use would be useful at school sites.